

'From La La to Zydeco' to Yo

A new DVD preserves classic zydeco performances.

By Nick Pittman
Entertainment Editor

HOW are Michael Jackson and Ray Charles related to Clifton Chenier and the new DVD *From La La to Zydeco — Creole and Zydeco Music From Louisiana?*

One of the biggest obstacles in making *From La La to Zydeco* was obtaining the rights for Chenier's performance of "What'd I Say." Originally a Ray Charles song, it — and the entire Charles catalog — belongs to Jackson.

History should be thankful for The King of Pop and his Warner Bros. mouthpiece eventual release of the King of Zydeco footage. Whatever the obstacles producer Robert Willey had to overcome, they were worth it to bring the public one of the Chenier's last performances.

The DVD begins with a young Chenier sitting on a porch wearing a white shirt and a tie, black slacks and tan socks playing the accordion the way only he could. It's from houses like this the film takes its name: In the early days of zydeco, rural Creoles escaping the hardships of their lives threw La La parties, where all the furni-



'From La La to Zydeco' features a cover image by Francis X. Pavy.

ture was removed from the house so it could be filled with dancers.

A couple more scenes follow Chenier's rise in stardom, before the footage of him performing Charles' song at the Original Zydeco. Seated on the stage with his huge accordion in his lap, Chenier approaches the end of his reign. However, with his royal cape tied around his neck, the king and held court with the accordion. After cranking out the C, he addresses the rumors of his death. He jokes, "I'm in the B class. I'm



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ture was removed from the house so it could be filled with dancers.

A couple more scenes follow Chenier's rise in stardom, before the film arrives at the footage of him performing Charles' song at the Original Zydeco Festival in 1987. Seated on the stage with his huge accordian in his lap, Chenier appears sick and near the end of his reign. However, with his royal cape tied around his neck, he still was the king and held court with the accordian. After cranking out the Charles classic, he addresses the rumors of his death. He jokes, "I'm in the B class. I'm gonna be here."

Continued on page 26



BOIS SEC ARDOIN



COREY LIL POP LEDET



BOOZOO CHAVIS

Continued from page 24

The set would be the last Original Zydeco Festival he played.

Those clips strung together in sequence are the only narrative in the movie. The film is not about talking, pondering or lecturing on what zydeco is, but showing the masses real zydeco.

"It's not a documentary kind of thing, with a lot of interviews dubbed over the music," says Willey.

The DVD's 90-minute run-time includes 22 back-to-back complete songs by Boozoo Chavis & His Magic Sounds Band, Nathan Williams & The Zydeco Cha Chas, The Creole Zydeco Farmers, Carlton & Preston Frank (playing fiddle and accordion in the country), Thomas "Big Hat" Fields & His

The Gig

DVD release party
Lil' Nathan Williams & The Zydeco
Big Timers

7 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 29
Clifton Chenier Center, 220 W.
Willow St.

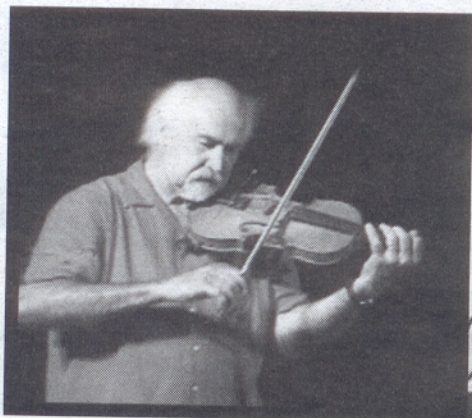
482-6012

Admission: free

Foot Stompin' Zydeco Band, Rosie Ledet & The Zydeco Playboys, Zydeco Joe, Corey "Lil Pop" Ledet & His Zydeco Band, Double Clutchin', Geno Delafosse & French Rockin' Boogie, Beausoliel, Curley Taylor & Zydeco Trouble, Jude Taylor, Keith Frank, Dexter Ardoin and the Frank Family Band.

Only in the DVD extras are there the usual documentary interviews. Among others, Bois Sec Ardoin displays his beautiful Creole French, Chavis talks about zydeco and playing house dances at 15, Canray

Fontenot talks about old La La dances being so packed people had to take turns dancing and Chris Strachwitz of Arhoolie Records recalls how he recorded Chenier and coined the term Louisiana Blues.



MICHAEL DOUCET



GENO DELAFOSE



CURLEY TAYLOR

In 2001, when Willey arrived in Lafayette — where he is now an assistant professor at the University of Louisiana, teaching music media, plus a Pro Tools class at SLCC — he knew very little of zydeco. Growing up in California, he had heard Buckwheat Zydeco through his extensive touring but did not realize the music was a huge part of the South Louisiana culture that crossed multiple generations of families and spawned numerous festivals.

Willey wanted to start filming festivals, but then he discovered Karl Fontenot's treasure trove of Zydeco Festival footage, shot for Acadiana Open Channel. When Fontenot left the station in 1998 to work at KRVS, Willey says his spot behind the camera at festivals was not filled. For a year and a half, Willey and his students lent a hand to create new footage — taping Festivals Acadiens, Festival International and a Downtown Alive! — while Willey worked to preserve what Fontenot and others had shot. Calling it a labor of love, Willey says the rights and publishing took more time than the actual production.

"The Creole and zydeco music is such a thriving and unique asset to the area, and I just didn't feel like it had enough ... there are all these great videos that were starting to decay in the library that were on old video tapes. (We wanted) to get a way to preserve them and make them available."

From *La La To Zydeco's* initial pressing is 2,000 copies, which will only be available to libraries. Because the performers donated their rights to the footage, Willey can't sell the DVD. But he hopes one day a commercial distribution will be possible because it would bring the DVD to more audiences.

"It's just our way to share the culture," says Willey. "It's a source of pride for the community." ☞

Nick Pittman is entertainment editor for *The Times*. Phone him at 289-6300, ext. 610, or e-mail him at nick.pittman@times-ofacadiana.com.



DEXTER ARDOIN

Music

New DVD traces music From La La to Zydeco

When was the last time you've been to the library? If the answer is years, shame on you. Public libraries, not only here in Lafayette but across the area, are rich and trusted resources of free information

available through books, magazines, videos, CDs and more.

(Remember, you can't believe everything you read on the Internet.)

If you're a music fan, here's another reason to go to the library. Check out a copy of an interesting DVD, *From La La to Zydeco — Creole and Zydeco Music from Louisiana*.

The disc contains 90 minutes of rare and entertaining footage of the latest and greatest in zydeco, from pioneers like Clifton Chenier and Boozoo Chavis to young guns like Rosie Ledet and Curley Taylor.

Catch a preview of the DVD from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday at the Clifton

Chenier Center. Lil Nathan and the Zydeco Big Timers will also perform.

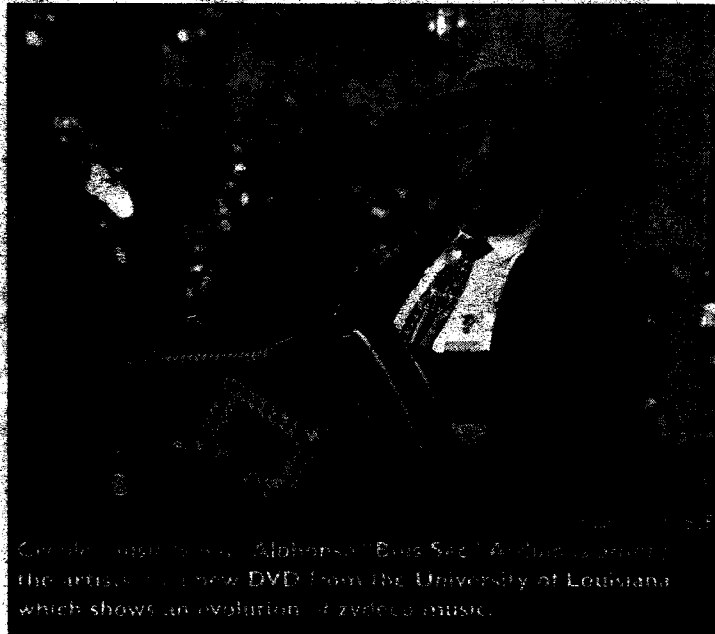
More than 1,000 copies of the *La La to Zydeco* DVD have been

donated to public and university libraries across the state. They will be available for checkout, but no videos will be sold.

The DVD is a project of Robert Willey of the School of Music at the University of Louisiana. Willey said his interest in documenting the music of southwest Louisiana began after he started recording festivals in the Lafayette area.

"I teach music media and felt it would provide good raw material for my students to work with for classroom projects," said Willey. "The musicians and sound companies were very generous in allowing me to make multitrack recordings."

"This was happening about the time that the price of camcorders



Clifton Chenier, Boozoo Chavis, Albertus, Eric Segal, Arthur, and others are featured on the new DVD from the University of Louisiana which shows an evolution of zydeco music.

and hard drives had dropped to the point of making desktop video production affordable. We got some new video and computer equipment at school and started making DVDs."

Besides using some commercial footage, Willey was able to tap into the archives of engineer Karl Fontenot of KRVS 88.7 FM. Fontenot had video tapes of the Original Southwest Louisiana Zydeco Music Festival that dated back to 1987.

Willey and Fontenot assembled a DVD and obtained a grant from the Acadiana Arts Council to make 500 copies. The Center for Culture and Eco-Tourism, the Lafayette Convention and Visitors Bureau and UL's College of Arts kicked in additional funds to make 1,000 copies.

Their efforts allow us to witness a young, comical Clifton Chenier in his prime, playing on a back porch in the country.

There's also the sick, frail Chenier captured, just a few months before his death, at the 1987 Plaisance festival.

Several generations of the influential Ardoin family are represented, along with the Franks, including the late Creole fiddler

Carlton Frank, Zydeco Joe, Nathan and the Zydeco Cha Chas, Geno Delafosse and many others perform.

Fontenot hopes this will serve as a time capsule of Creole culture.

"I watched the music change with new trends as it evolved, and

I felt it was important to capture and document the traditions which started this music and the path it was taking," said Fontenot.

"Hopefully, some of this information will serve as a historical

document, that was my only goal at the time."

Hopefully, this DVD will inspire others to follow in the footsteps of Willey, Fontenot and the precious few who have taken the time to document local music

and culture. This region is filled with dances, festivals, jam sessions, workshops, trail rides and more cultural events that can be found only here in south Louisiana.

Few of these events are ever recorded. If they are documented, many times it's by an out-of-state or international producer.

Usually, it's not until a pioneer or legend passes away that we regret not filming their legacy. Hopefully, *La La to Zydeco* will prompt more to put hometown culture on video so we're no longer left with just memories to pass to the next generation.

(Listen to Herman Fuselier's radio show at 10 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday on KRVS 88.7 FM. His TV show airs at 1:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday on KDCG-TV 22.)



Lil Nathan

Want to go?

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■ 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday

■ Clifton Chenier Center, 220 W. Willow St.

■ Admission: Free

■ Tickets: 482-6012